

## **A social mark of the mental**

Devin Sanchez Curry

for *Introducing Philosophy of Mind, Today*

### **1. What makes your mind a mind?**

What is a mind, anyway? What distinguishes humans, dolphins, crows, and other animals with minds from bacteria, trees, scallops, and other mindless organisms? Are we even sure that bacteria, trees, and scallops don't have minds? To answer this third question, it seems like we would first need an answer to the other questions: we would need a criterion that could be used to draw a dividing line between the minded and the mindless. Only then would we be in a position to determine whether scallops—with their simple nervous systems, scores of tiny eyes, and limited perceptual and locomotive capacities—should count as having minds.

For now, let's focus on the **properties** of human beings. What makes your beliefs, desires, emotions, and feelings of pain *mental* things, whereas the blood coursing through your brain and the birthmark on your shoulder are merely physiological, non-mental things?<sup>1</sup> The preceding three chapters might be thought to furnish us with competing answers to this question. **Intentionality**, **consciousness**, and conduciveness to **agency** have each been taken to be promising candidates for the **mark of the mental**: the criterion distinguishing mental from non-mental things.

Many philosophers propose that what sets creatures with minds apart from mindless robots (as well as inanimate objects) is that minded creatures can think about things, and genuinely understand the things they're thinking about. For example, when you come to the end of this sentence, you'll be thinking about Snoop Dogg carrying the Olympic torch. And you're not just reproducing those words in your head, the way a computer might reproduce words on a screen, without understanding what they mean. Instead, you're actually mentally grasping the meaning of the idea of Snoop Dogg carrying the Olympic torch. Maybe the mark of the mental is intentionality: mental things meaningfully **represent** other things, and that's what makes them mental.

Or maybe what really sets creatures with minds apart is that there's something it's like for them to experience the world from a first-person point of view. If so, then the mark of the mental is phenomenal consciousness: there's a (metaphorical) inner light shining on mental things, and that's what makes them mental.

Or maybe what sets creatures with minds apart is that they have free will, or at least enough agency to choose how they act in the world. If so, then the mark of the mental is conduciveness to agency: mental things contribute to purposeful actions, and that's what makes them mental.

Here's the rub. To count as a genuine mark of the mental, a criterion would have to apply to all mental things without also applying to any non-mental things. If intentionality were the

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<sup>1</sup> The word "thing" is sometimes used to refer only to physical objects, but throughout this essay I'll use the word much more broadly. Things, on my broad usage, include events (things that happen), processes (things that are happening), actions, tendencies, and experiences, as well as physical objects.

mark of the mental, then all mental things would have to be *about* something in the meaningful way that your thoughts represent whatever you're thinking about. Moreover, no non-mental things could be *about* Snoop Dogg carrying a torch (or anything else) in that same meaningful way. The problem is that each of our candidate marks of the mental—not only intentionality, but also consciousness and (conduciveness to) agency—ends up either excluding some things that are intuitively mental or including some things that are intuitively non-mental.

For example, character traits like integrity and intelligence are intuitively mental. When I say that Harriet has integrity, or that Ada is smart, I'm referring to qualities of their minds. But these qualities don't seem to be intentional: they aren't (directly) *about* anything. Having integrity is a matter of sticking up for your principles through thick and thin. Being intelligent is a matter of being better at figuring things out than other people. Neither of these traits seems to be marked by the special kind of aboutness that characterizes thought and talk.

Nor are character traits necessarily conscious (or transparent to consciousness). You don't experience your integrity or intelligence in anything like the way that you experience the blueness of the sky or the feeling of an itchy poison ivy rash on your ankle. You also don't immediately discover which character traits you have through inward reflection. You might not even have a good handle on how smart you are, or how prone you are to stick up for what you believe in. And that's not to mention the many unconscious mental things studied as theoretical posits in **cognitive science**, from automatic mental calculations to implicit biases.

The third candidate—conduciveness to agency—can be understood in various ways. We could define it broadly to mean “anything that makes a contribution to somebody's purposeful actions.” If defined that broadly, then maybe it will include all mental things. But it will also include intuitively non-mental things, such as muscle twitches and wheelchairs. Wheelchairs don't seem like parts of people's minds. So maybe we should define “conduciveness to agency” more narrowly, to mean only “those things that are under the agent's direct cognitive control.” If defined that narrowly, then *maybe* it will exclude all non-mental things. But it will also exclude some intuitively mental things, like intrusive thoughts and debilitating pain.

Agency, consciousness, and intentionality are all special features of minds, to be sure. But the counterexamples I've presented threaten each of their bids to be *the* mark of the mental—the criterion that sets mental things apart from non-mental things. Perhaps the issue is that there is no feature of mental things, in and of themselves, that makes them mental. Maybe, instead, a thing is mental in virtue of where it comes from. Another candidate mark of the mental is **neural origins**: mental things come from brains, and that's what makes them mental.

The problem, once again, is that not all things with origins in brains are intuitively mental. Consider your brain's excretion of waste via cerebrospinal fluid, or **socially constructed** institutions such as the National Basketball Association. Both arise from brains. Neither are intuitively mental in nature. The way your brain gets rid of gunk seems to be a distinctively physiological, not psychological, thing. The NBA, meanwhile, is **mind-dependent**: there wouldn't be sports leagues if there weren't minds to think them up and make them happen. But that doesn't seem to entail that sports leagues (or other socially constructed things like governments, universities, books, and money) should be counted as mental things. So neural origins won't fly as the mark of the mental either.

## 2. The puzzle

I've used the word "intuitively" a lot. Integrity and intelligence are intuitively mental. Wheelchairs are intuitively non-mental. What I mean by "intuitively" is something like "according to a thoughtful-but-cursory non-expert judgement." I also mean to express that I expect that you, the reader, will concur with me when I assert (without yet giving you an argument, you'll notice!) that intelligence should be counted as a mental thing, or that wheelchairs shouldn't.

Here's the puzzle at the heart of this essay. Intentionality, consciousness, conduciveness to agency, and neural origins are each intuitively appealing as marks of the mental—they each sound pretty good to a reasonable ear—except that they turn out not to align with some of our other intuitive judgements about what's mental and what's not. So some intuition or other has got to give.

## 3. Possible solution: a scientific mark of the mental

Maybe we should throw them all out. One way to try to solve our puzzle would be to dispense with the method of intuition-mongering entirely. We could rely on a more objective method to establish which things should count as mental and which shouldn't—even if that method yields some counter-intuitive results. In particular, we could look to the expertise of scientists: we could declare that if psychologists and other cognitive scientists find a place for a thing in their best theories of how minds work, then it counts as mental; if not, not. If intuition clashes with science, so much the worse for intuition. (Intuition told us that the Earth was the center of the universe and that blood-sucking leeches could cure strep throat, until science supplied a better cosmology and better medicine.) According to this way of attempting to solve the puzzle, things are legitimately marked as mental only by theories constructed within the sciences of the mind.

I don't love this attempted solution. The apparent rationale for deferring to science would be that science (unlike untutored intuition) promises to deliver a clear, univocal mark of the mental. But there is no single, unified science of the mind which presents a single, unified theory of the mind. On the contrary, the interdisciplinary field of cognitive science comprises a bunch of distinct mind and brain sciences, each of which includes several subdisciplines of its own. Moreover, scientists within each of those subdisciplines defend a bunch of different **models** of mental functioning.

Models are simplified **representations**, which modelers **interpret** as accurately describing certain parts of the world in certain respects. Some theoretical models used in cognitive science are qualitative, taking the form of descriptions in plain English; others are almost purely mathematical, taking the form of series of equations; yet others are **computational**, taking the form of computer simulations. Many theoretical models are explicitly stated, written down, or physically constructed; other models—including many non-scientific models—are implicit in modelers' ways of thinking about the world.

Some scientific models of minds (or parts of minds) are in direct competition with one another. Other scientific models differ with respect to what mental things they include *without*

being in competition with one another, since which things they include (and count as mental) depends on their divergent standards and purposes. (Ali Boyle discusses this kind of **domain mismatch** in greater depth in Chapter xx of this coursebook.) In short, cognitive scientific practices are diverse and (in many cases) both theoretically and methodologically unsettled. So science isn't currently in a good position—and pervasive domain mismatch gives us reason to believe it may never be in a good position—to deliver a clear, univocal mark of the mental.

I *do* think the scientific mark of the mental under consideration gets a couple important matters right. To understand the mark of the mental—to understand what makes things mental (or not)—we have to pay attention to the models people use when thinking about minds. And we should be open to the possibility that there is a diversity of these models, and that each model's details depend a great deal on the specific purposes to which that model is put. But scientists aren't the only people who are modelers of minds. And I don't think that scientists' theoretical models should be the sole (or primary) objects of our attention. Instead, we should pay attention, first and foremost, to regular people, and to the models implicit in the everyday social practices within which we human beings understand each other (and some other animals) as fellow agents.

#### **4. The point of talking about minds**

The point of talking about minds isn't, in the first place, to single out conscious things, or intentional things, or things that support agency. Talking about minds certainly isn't just an oblique way of talking about brains. Nor do people usually aim to articulate a scientific theory when they chitchat about how Alfred feels, or about whether Vanessa is smarter than Earn. I don't mean to deny that talking about minds does often involve talking about consciousness, or intentionality, or agency, or brains, or things that scientists study. Rather, I mean to stress that talk about minds serves, in the first place, as an aid for understanding, judging, and dealing with the people in our lives (including ourselves). Everything else is secondary.

Like all terms, the term "mind" was made up by human beings. Some terms we make up to fit the already well-delimited things in the world that philosophers call **natural kinds**. There are many natural kinds that we refer to under the umbrella of "mind." Consider the sensation of a toothache, or the memory of where to find food. Human beings, rats, and sharks experience toothaches, and remember to look in the fridge, garbage, or reef when they're hungry, totally independently of whether anybody thinks of them as having minds. However, social practices that involve talking about minds don't enable us to understand people better *solely* by latching onto already well-delimited things. The relevant social practices also shape some the things they're about, and often lump things together that might not so naturally go together.

Consider the entrepreneurial mindset. People don't have entrepreneurial mindsets independently of social practices that involve thinking of each other as having minds. On the contrary, the gerrymandered pattern of interests, ambitions, values, and abilities that together make up an entrepreneurial mindset arises largely in response to social pressures that cause ambitious people in modern capitalist societies to choose to pursue certain interests, emphasize certain values, and cultivate certain abilities (at the expense of other potential combinations of interests, values, and abilities).

A great deal of research by psychologists and philosophers is dedicated to explaining how the concept of mind serves social (and self-reflective) purposes. Our ways of thinking and talking about minds draw new boundaries around some of the things already in nature, and, partly through this boundary redrawing, introduce some new mental things into the world. Cutting-edge work in cognitive science suggests that human beings come to understand each other by wielding (and revising) implicit models of minds, and that over time these models of minds play a role in shaping how the things that make up people's minds actually work. As soon as people who want to start a business come up with—and come to value—the idea of the entrepreneurial mindset, for instance, they're likely to make an effort to change their own minds (and to influence other impressionable minds) to better approximate their models of how an entrepreneur ought to think, feel, and act.

As the entrepreneurial mindset example reveals, science isn't the only human practice that can change which things people model as mental over time. And cognitive scientific models are just a subset of the models that we humans employ in order to better understand ourselves and each other. Human beings also wield implicit “folk psychological” or “social cognitive” models—intuitive ways of thinking about minds and the relations between mental things—in order to guide our relationships and interactions with others (and to come to know ourselves as occupants of our social worlds). Because they are used for different purposes, these intuitive models differ in important respects from the theoretical models that guide scientific practice.

## **5. My solution: a social mark of the mental**

Recall our puzzle from §2. Every intuitively appealing candidate mark of the mental has unintuitive consequences: it either counts some intuitively mental things as non-mental, or it counts some intuitively non-mental things as mental. My preferred solution to the puzzle doesn't replace intuition-mongering with deference to science. Instead, my preferred solution involves pointing out that the relevant intuitions are diverse and changeable. In particular, I want to propose a social mark of the mental, according to which minds encompass all (but only) the things that people actually model as mental as they go about their social lives.

There's an important sense in which this proposed social mark of the mental—by contrast with the scientific mark of the mental considered above—implies that intuitions *are* decisive when it comes to counting a thing as mental or not. Consider, for example, a depressed man of integrity named Bartleby. If Bartleby currently intuitively understands his integrity to be a mental thing, and intuitively understands his serotonin levels to be non-mental things, then integrity really is a mental thing relative to Bartleby's intuitive model, and serotonin levels really aren't mental things relative to Bartleby's model. However, Bartleby's model is liable to change over time. Maybe, after leaving his dead-end job as a secretary and enrolling in a neuropsychiatry course, Bartleby comes to identify his depression with his serotonin levels, and thus becomes convinced that his serotonin levels are themselves mental things. In that case, it really will be true that serotonin levels *are* mental, relative to Bartleby's revised model, even though they were merely physiological relative to his old model.

So intuitions are decisive—but they're decisive only in relation to the particular models of minds from which those intuitions spring. And models can differ across time, from culture to

culture, even from person to person, though how individual people model minds is shaped significantly by broader cultural forces. Indeed, cultural, institutional, and environmental factors might drive a single person to model minds differently in different contexts. A cognitive neuroscientist may well wield a different understanding of mindedness while out drinking with friends than she would in her lab.

To reiterate, I am suggesting that a thing is mental if and only if it is interpreted as mental within an (intuitive or theoretical) model of the mind. There's no fact of the matter about whether any given thing is mental, independent of the facts about whether or not people model that thing as mental. But relative to people who do model a given thing as mental (in a particular context), that thing *really is* mental. There's nothing more (nor less!) to being mental than that: whether or not a thing is mental depends entirely on whether the person posing that question considers it to be mental. (And whether somebody considers a thing to be mental is shaped by their reasons for thinking about people and their minds. Sometimes those reasons are scientific; more often, they're social.)

Interestingly, the candidate marks of the mental discussed in §1 are all consistent with this social mark of the mental, insofar as modelers sometimes understand minds solely in terms of things featuring a particular (set of) mark(s). Relative to the 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher René Descartes's model of minds, for example, consciousness really was the mark of the mental. After all, Descartes modelled minds as comprising all and only conscious things. He famously declared that animals' abilities to perceive their environments and respond adversely to apparently painful stimuli shouldn't count as mental abilities, since he held that nonhuman animals aren't conscious. Despite having genuine affection for his hound, Monsieur Grat ("Mr. Scratch"), Descartes felt okay about vivisectioning dogs—dissecting them alive, to investigate how their still-beating hearts, lungs, eyes, and brains function—because of his conviction that they weren't conscious (and thus couldn't feel real, *mental* pain, even though they reacted physiologically as if they were suffering).

It might be better to think of the social mark that I've proposed as a *meta-mark of the mental*. This meta-mark dictates that **first-order mark(s) of the mental** are derived, in practice, from however actual people are actually understanding each other's minds. Consciousness genuinely was the mark of the mental derived from Descartes's actual practice of modeling minds. Intentionality, conduciveness to agency, neural origins, or conformity with a particular scientific theory may also be genuine marks of the mental, derived from other people's actual practices of modeling minds. A social meta-mark of the mental makes sense of this diversity in first-order marks of the mental.

It's not surprising that many people today still find consciousness to be an intuitive candidate for the mark, at least prior to a bit of reflection on counterexamples. After all, Descartes has had an outsized historical influence on how people have thought about minds over the past few hundred years. Nevertheless, consciousness is no longer the (sole) first-order mark of the mental: not relative to most 21<sup>st</sup> century cognitive scientists' models—which tend to include many unconscious mental processes—nor, I would wager, relative to most lay people's models (given the popularity among the general public of Freudian ideas about repression and the dynamic unconscious, ideas from social psychology about implicit bias, and so on).

If I'm right that the mark of the mental can shift in tandem with changes in how people understand each other across time periods, cultures, and contexts, then the ways we conceive of minds—mostly for everyday, social or self-reflective purposes—are fundamental to the **metaphysics** of mind, and especially to the **ontological** question of which things are mental things. If we want to study the ontology of mind, then we should first study **social cognition** in all of its particularity.

**6. Does it make any sense to say that what makes your mind a mind is other minds?** *[Note to reader: this is the trickiest section of this essay. Happily, it's both short(ish) and skippable.]*

One corollary of this conclusion is that the mark of the mental is itself mind-dependent—as mind-dependent as socially constructed institutions like the NBA—insofar as the (social cognitive and cognitive scientific) models of minds on which the mark depends happen to count *themselves* as mental. There would be no mark(s) of the mental—and thus no things with minds, as distinct from things without minds—if not for models which are themselves mental.

I admit that this smells fishy. How could the existence of a mark of the mental—and indeed the existence of minds—depend on something, well, mental? Don't we need to establish the existence of minds before we're licensed to appeal to mental things in our metaphysical explanations? How could other minds make your mind, and themselves, into minds?

The key to resolving this apparent paradox is the fact that the metaphysical explanation in question doesn't actually appeal to the idea that minds are mind-dependent. It obviously appeals to the idea that minds are *model*-dependent. Things are mental relative to models that count them as mental, and non-mental relative to models that don't. But the idea that the models on which mindedness depends are themselves *mental* models plays no role in this explanation of the mark of the mental. The explanation could hold water even if all models of minds were generally agreed to be non-mental things, like model trains and railroads, or like the excretion of waste from the brain via cerebrospinal fluid.

Of course, given current social practices, it is the case that most of our models of minds tend to count themselves as mental. In other words, we tend to think that, when you're attributing mental states to people, you're using your own mind to do so. But this is a contingent, not a necessary, fact about the mark of the mental. There's no law of nature requiring that we conceive of intuitive models of minds as mental things in their own right. It is possible (though unlikely) that, as the mind and brain sciences evolve and further influence how people think about mentality, the relevant models will be revised such that they no longer count themselves as mental.

One possible future—much hoped for among some philosophers of mind!—would witness a widespread Cartesian (re)commitment to consciousness as the mark of the mental, paired with a widespread recognition that we aren't conscious of the inner operations of our own social cognitive models of the mind. In that imagined future, the mark of the mental would cease to be mind-dependent (though it would remain model-dependent).

## 7. Final answers to opening questions

**Q:** So, what makes your mind a *mind*?

**A:** The fact that people (including you, I bet) think about it as such. To be precise: the fact that your mind fits one or more interpreters' models of mindedness.

Now, it might be objected that there has to be a special something that makes a model a model *of a mind* (as opposed to a model of a merely physiological part of the body, or a model of a weather event). Maybe I've just pushed the issue back a step: I've said that models of minds set the mark of the mental—they're what mark things as mental things—but I haven't said what marks models *as models of mental things*. In introducing a social meta-mark of the mental, haven't I merely replaced a puzzle about the mark of the mental with a puzzle about the mark of models of the mental?

Yes. I have. I need a solution to this new puzzle, or my solution to the old puzzle isn't going to fly. Happily, I think my emphasis on the changeability of models of minds suggests a solution to the new puzzle, just as it suggested a solution to the old puzzle.

When models of minds were first constructed, way back when humans (or our evolutionary ancestors) were just starting to develop sophisticated social practices, there was likely some clear criterion that set models of minds apart from other models. Our old candidates are once again plausible candidates here: perhaps the original models of minds were specifically models of intentional things, or models of things conducive to agency. My own (tentatively) favored hypothesis is that, originally, the special something that made a model a model *of a mind* was that it was a model of consciousness—and, more precisely, a model of a first-person perspective. In other words, perspectival consciousness was the original first-order mark of the mental, per our ancestors' original social cognitive models, and models were models of minds insofar as they were models of conscious first-person points of view.

But consciousness didn't remain the first-order mark of the mental; nor did it remain the mark of models of the mental: the mark of which models are models of minds. Instead, at some point in this hypothesized prehistory, our ancestors realized that it was useful (for their social purposes) to lump other, non-perspectival things (like character traits and subconscious processes) into their models alongside perspectival things. Over time, the conscious first-person perspective lost its place as the indisputable, consensus mark. It then had an (ultimately short-lived) resurgence of popularity in Europe during the Enlightenment, thanks to Descartes.

Conscious things are still important parts of most (if not all) models of mindedness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it's no longer the case that in order to count as a model of mindedness, a model must center the first-person perspective. Instead, so long as a model has sufficient continuity with the models that we're accustomed to counting as models of minds, given contemporary mind-modelling practices, that model will strike us as (and thus really will be) a model of minds. No particular first-order mark of the mental must be baked into a model for it to be a model of a mind (as opposed to a model of some other, non-mental part of a person).



**Q:** What makes your beliefs, desires, emotions, and feelings of pain *mental* things, whereas the blood coursing through your brain and the birthmark on your shoulder are non-mental, merely physiological things?

**A:** The fact that people (including you, I bet) think about beliefs, desires, emotions, and feelings of pain—but not blood flows or birthmarks—as mental. To be precise: the fact that one or more interpreters include beliefs, desires, emotions, and feelings of pain—but not blood flows or birthmarks—in their models of mindedness.

**Q:** What distinguishes humans, dolphins, and crows from bacteria, trees, and scallops?

**A:** First, there's the fact that humans, dolphins, and crows believe, desire, emote, and feel pain in manners that people tend to include in their intuitive models of minds. On a more general level, there's also the fact that people tend to treat humans (but not bacteria, trees, or scallops) as fellow inhabitants of our social worlds—as beings to whom it is appropriate to attribute minds, and to understand in terms of our models of minds. To the extent that people are less inclined to treat dolphins and crows as fellows, that reticence evinces an ambivalence about whether it is appropriate to attribute minds to them, including a reticence about whether they *really* believe, desire, emote, and feel pain.

**Q:** Are we sure that bacteria, trees, and scallops don't have minds?

**A:** No. If scientists were to discover that scallops have beliefs or feel pain, then, so long as we continued to model believing and feeling pain as mental things, we would likely thereby become convinced that scallops do have minds. In recent years, some scientists and philosophers have argued that similar considerations should lead us to attribute minds not only to mollusks, but also to plants, and even to unicellular organisms.

**Q:** So what is a mind, anyway?

**A:** Abstractly speaking, a mind is a collection of things that an interpreter (you, for example, or me) categorizes as a unified part of a person or other entity. Treating that person or entity as minded serves the interpreter's social (or self-reflective, or scientific) purposes. Relative to many interpreters' models, this tenuously unified collection of things—this mind—might be considered to be the essence of a person: the part of the person being interpreted that makes them a person at all, and that makes them who they in particular are *as* a person. But no such concrete answer can be given except in relation to particular (intuitive or scientific) models of mindedness.

Relative to Descartes's model, a mind is a collection of essentially conscious things, inherently unified insofar as they all form part of the same consciousness. In contrast, relative to most 21<sup>st</sup> century models, a mind is a much more motley collection, comprising, among many other things, conscious pains and unconscious desires, intentional thoughts and nonintentional character traits, interests that are conducive to agency and addictions that are unconducive to agency. This diverse catalogue of things is unified only insofar as we humans—we interpreters of ourselves and others—have taken to relating to each other as fellow persons with complex, heterogenous minds.

It's fruitful to understand minds in this way, given how important it is to us social creatures to have a nuanced grip on what people are like, and given the richly patterned but indefinitely variable ways in which our almost unfathomably complex nervous systems can cause us to act. In the face of this complexity, powerful social forces work to ensure that most people understand each other along roughly similar lines. Humans are always gossiping about what people are like. Gossip leads us to revise our interpretations of particular people to better align with others'. It also conspires with other social practices (like teaching, storytelling, and making fun of weirdos with strange ideas) to get us to revise our general models of mindedness to better align with the norms of our society. Nevertheless, nothing in nature dictates that minds must be modelled in the precise manners that we're accustomed to modelling them in post-industrial societies.

Your brain, with its 86 billion neurons transmitting electrical and chemical signals, somehow giving rise to conscious feelings and intentional thoughts, is what it is, whether you like it or not. Of course, you can change the physical and functional makeup of your brain through hard work like learning, exercising, dieting, aging, or blasting a huge iron rod through your skull. But you can't alter your brain in any fundamental way just by conceiving of it differently. Your mind, by contrast, is in one important sense nothing more and nothing less than what you — and others — make it out to be.

**Suggestions for further reading:** Rorty, Dennett, Wilkes, Crane, Wiredu, PGS, Andrews, Spaulding, McGeer, Zawidzki, Figdor, Chirimuuta, Gough, Westfall